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ABSTRACT

At Ball State University in Indiana, the basic course (COMM 210) focuses communication concepts and skills with the goals of helping students understand basic communication principles, providing them with the opportunity to improve their communication skills, and enhancing their awareness of communication's role in culture. Special emphasis is placed on preparing, selecting, organizing, and delivering oral messages, as well as on analyzing and evaluating the speaking-listening process. Many of the course's activities are of a collaborative nature allowing students to work with other students in the enhancement of communication skills. COMM 210 is one of five required University Core Curriculum (UCC) courses. The UCC program is required of all undergraduate students regardless of the academic majors they choose. Consisting of 41 credits, the UCC program is designed to help all Ball State students realize from their education the core benefits of knowledge, skills, and values. The central purpose of UCC is to enable women and men to live rich, satisfying lives and to undertake the broad responsibilities of citizens in a free society. After explaining UCC (and COMM 210) at Ball State, this paper offers students suggestions for making the basic course work for them. The paper next presents some assessment results--from the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) and the Personal Report of Ability (PRA) assessment, from student survey assessment, from exam assessment, from speech assessment, and from assessment of written assignments. It then offers some concluding thoughts on how a basic course in communication can remain true to the discipline and still fit into a general education program. (Contains 10 notes and 14 references.) (NKA)

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(Or, How We Made It Work for Us)

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Paper presented at the NCA Summer Conference 2001, Washington, D.C., June 2001. The following discussion of "guiding principles" is based on continuing assessment efforts for Communication 210: Fundamentals of Public Communication and an assessment report submitted to Ball State University's University Core Curriculum committee on August 31, 1999. The complete report is available from the author at jbuckrop@bsu.edu

Our Basic Course as General Education

General Description: In Indiana, both the 30-hour transfer agreement with Ivy Tech State College and the transfer agreement among schools in the Statewide Partnership in Education identify a public speaking course as the basic course in Communication. At Ball State University, the basic course (COMM 210) focuses on communication concepts and skills with the goals of helping students understand basic communication principles, providing them with the opportunity to improve oral communication skills, and enhancing their awareness of communication's role in culture. Special emphasis is placed on preparing, selecting, organizing, and delivering oral messages, as well as on analyzing and evaluating the speaking-listening process. Many of the activities of the course are of a collaborative nature, allowing students to work with other students in the enhancement

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of communication skills. COMM 210 is one five required University Core Curriculum (UCC) courses.

Description of University Core Curriculum (UCC):[1] The UCC program is required of all undergraduate students regardless of the academic majors they choose. Consisting of 41 credits, the UCC program is designed to help all Ball State students realize from their college education these core benefits:

- Knowledge--those facts, concepts, and principles from the humanities, the social, behavioral, and natural sciences, and from other disciplines that are deemed important for understanding and solving the common problems of living.
- Skills--key intellectual abilities such as communicating, quantifying, analyzing, and synthesizing.
- Values--preferred patterns of behavior, including respect for individual dignity, concern for group welfare, and trust in human intelligence.

The central purpose of the University Core Curriculum is to enable women and men to live rich, satisfying lives and to undertake the broad responsibilities of citizenship in a free society. Although it seeks to discover and nurture individual talents, the core curriculum's primary emphasis is on preparation for roles that people share in common as human beings as well as members of family and community groups.

The UCC program consists of more than the requirement that students have contact with the major fields of knowledge. The program suggests concern for direction, organization, spirit, appropriate instruction, and the objectives of component courses. The spirit of the core curriculum emerges from the kinds of intellectual attitudes the university strives to develop in students. Through their core curriculum courses, students will be able to

- engage in lifelong education by learning to acquire knowledge and to use it for intelligent ends.
- communicate at a level acceptable for college graduates.
- clarify their personal values and be sensitive to those held by others.
- recognize and seek solutions for the common problems of living by drawing on a knowledge of historical and contemporary events and elements of the cultural heritage surrounding those events.
- assess their unique interests, talents, and goals and choose specialized learning experiences that will foster their fulfillment.

All students graduating from BSU with baccalaureate degrees must complete the 41 credit-hour core curriculum requirement. The UCC program consists of core

requirements (a series of five or six foundation courses) and distribution requirements from the physical sciences, earth sciences, social and behavioral sciences, fine arts and humanities, international/global studies, and physical education, fitness, and wellness. All BSU students except elementary education and special education students must have credit or departmental exemption in COMM 210 in order to graduate. Elementary education and special education majors are required to take COMM 377: Communication for the Elementary Teacher, a hybrid basic course consisting of public speaking, interpersonal communication, and dramatic arts.

COMM 210 Rationale for Inclusion in UCC: A well-known adage has it that of all the creatures inhabiting the earth, fish are the least likely to ever discover water. So it is with communication. Communication is an innate endowment of being human. We are engulfed by communication in all our daily affairs, but usually we are not directly aware of our oral communication environment. Nonetheless communication is vital to our well being and survival, for without communication we are like the fish out of water. Without effective communication we are like the fish in murky water. (Ruben, 1996) We continue to argue that COMM 210 should be included among the UCC core because:[2]

- The competencies involved in public communication are prerequisites to success in public and private life.
- Beyond the confines of the educational setting, oral communication competency can contribute to social adjustment, satisfying interpersonal relationships, and ultimately, professional success.
- Speech curricula have traditionally stressed the importance of communication, especially public communication, for the preservation of a democratic society.
- Oral communication is essential to full psychological development.
- The fact that all students come to school with some basic communication skills and also seem to develop more mature communication behaviors on their own as they grow older does not imply that all students are effective or competent communicators. Educators cannot rely on haphazard, unguided learning outside of the classroom to impart communication effectiveness. Systematic instruction in communication is imperative.
- Of all the basic competencies, communication skills are still frequently neglected in many schools.

Suggestions for Making this Work for You

Rank your goals and objectives.[3] Ranking your course and general education goals and objectives permits you to clearly state what it is that you can do and are willing to do. For example, the COMM faculty at BSU ranked the UCC goals in the following manner for its basic course:

- Assists students to communicate at a level acceptable for college graduates
- Encourage Student Sensitivity to Value of Others
- Assists students in Clarifying Personal Values
- Provides Classroom Environment that Builds Skills in Problem Recognition
- Aids Students in Problem Solving
- Encourages Students to Assess Their Own Interests, Talents, Goals
- Provides Opportunity for Students to Work Cooperatively
- Instill Desire for Lifelong Learning
- Directs Students toward Specialized Learning Experiences

The COMM faculty ranked the UCC Distribution and Foundation Goals in the following manner:

- Provides basic Academic and Intellectual tools
- Provides basic Understanding of Civilization

Knowing what you can and are willing to do and what you cannot and are not willing to do will assist you in course design, course assessment, and allocation of resources

Don't try to be all things to all people: Put the discipline first. Although the faculty ranked the goals as the UCC Committee required, I also argued that the ranking is conditional upon the following observations and concerns:

- UCC views the objectives as independent (especially for assessment purposes), but the objectives are, in fact, interdependent.
- The faculty ranked the goals in terms of importance, but the UCC goals may be constrained by the goals of the communication discipline (e.g., public-centered not speaker-centered) and chronology necessary in teaching a skills course (e.g., recognition of problem before solution of problem, evaluation of criteria before choosing of solution).
- To list any other goal higher than "assists students to communicate" would be to disregard the mission of the discipline and of our department. However, ability to communicate at a level acceptable for college graduates is problematic when "acceptable level" has not been defined by the UCC and the overwhelming majority of students taking the course are freshmen and sophomores.[4] Clearly our aim is in assisting students by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and

opportunities to improve their communication.

- Instilling a desire for life-long learning is not the same as providing the skills necessary to achieve life-long learning. The COMM faculty sees their mission as more in line with helping the students to develop the skills necessary for life-long learning.

- Re: the foundation goals. One cannot understand civilization without the ability to do so. We believe that ability is gained through academic and intellectual tools. Therefore, we do not separate these objectives in terms of assessment.

- The COMM faculty fully support all of the UCC goals; however, we believe we are best able to meet the first seven UCC objectives (as ranked by the faculty). We recognize that seeking to achieve all of the UCC goals could be detrimental to course content, but we feel COMM 210 is uniquely qualified to address most of the UCC objectives.[5]

Don't Assume "They" Know What You Do, How You Do It, or Why You do It Better Than Anyone Else. It is necessary to demonstrate to administrators, faculty, and students alike the why the basic course should be a part of general education and how it fits in with the goals and objectives of general education. For example, the relationship between the UCC objective "Assists students to communicate at a level acceptable for college graduates" is demonstrated through the course objectives.[6] Furthermore, all course activities are designed to promote students' effective communication.[7] But demonstrating how the basic course can "Encourage Student Sensitivity to Value of Others" may not be so obvious. For example, we claimed that encouraging sensitivity to the values of others is accomplished, among other ways, through a discussion of audience analysis and adaptation. Whenever possible demonstrate the relationship between general education and the basic course through course objectives, assignments, and discipline-related theory and practices. All of the major course assignments in the student workbook list course objectives and UCC objectives; GTA lesson plans contain sample content discussion questions and sample UCC discussion questions.

Assess Your Course or Someone Else Will. Methods of assessment were determined in consultation with the COMM faculty, the National Communication Association, the Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research at BSU, and the UCC.[8] Methods are provided below.

- Each semester students complete two pre- and post-course assessment instruments. The first of these instruments is the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA, McCroskey, 1970). The second instrument is the Personal Report of Ability (PRA, Nitcavic & Buckrop, 1997), a 32-question survey students complete on a five-point scale. Students are asked to rate their knowledge of a course objective (e.g., analyzing an audience) and their ability to execute the objective.

- Students complete an on-line survey of questions at the end of the semester. The instrument measures the extent to which students think the course has relevance in

their lives, the extent to which they perceive they have accomplished the course objectives, and the extent to which they feel UCC objectives are accomplished by the course content and assignments. The on-line survey was used in lieu of focus groups as it was deemed less time consuming.

- COMM 210 students are required to take a midterm and a final exam. Selected questions from each exam are used in the assessment of UCC objectives.

- Each of the major assignments within the course is directly tied to specific course and UCC objectives. From a random sample of 15 sections[9], a collection of student work (speech outlines, evaluation sheets, video analyses, non-classroom speaker critiques, and student speech videos) was gathered to determine the extent to which the assignments were fulfilling the objectives and the extent to which the students were meeting the objectives. The sample, selected by the Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research, included sections offered throughout the week and at a variety of times during the day. For instance, the second speaking assignment is the Narrative speech. Students are required to use a simple structure and a clear-cut thesis statement that is appropriate to their audience and to use a conversational delivery. The assignment is designed to help students communicate at an acceptable level, clarify their personal values, and be sensitive to the values of others. Essentially students are to tell a meaningful personal story in a manner that is easy for the audience to follow. This story should have a lesson that is relevant to their current audience. The third speaking assignment is the informative speech. Students are to provide the audience with new and/or useful information regarding a significant issue, idea, concept, condition, place, person, event, or object related to a culture, country, or historical time period as indicated by the instructor using an appropriate organizational pattern. The assignment addresses the UCC goals of engaging in life-long education, acquiring and using knowledge, communicating at an acceptable level, clarifying personal values, being sensitive to values of others, and assessing personal interests and goals. (This speech is not to be a demonstration or "how to" speech so that students must develop content areas rather than steps in a process.) The Outside Speaker Critique requires students to analyze and evaluate a speaker outside of their classroom environment. This assignment is designed to aid students in the identification and understanding of the process of communication, and to help them with their ability to critically evaluate messages. The assignment further aids students through the UCC goals of engaging them in life-long learning, clarification of values, sensitivity to values of others, recognition of problems, assessment of interests and goals, and selection of specialized learning environments.

Some Interesting Assessment Results

Results of the PRPSA and PRA Assessment. Students reported a decrease in public speaking anxiety and an increase in public speaking ability from the beginning to the end of the course. This effect is greater for females and than males, a finding consistent with other communication apprehension research. Ball State students in COMM 210 begin the semester suffering from anxiety at levels determined by Richmond and McCroskey to be moderately high to very high. By the end of the semester, anxiety has decreased to

moderate levels.

Results of Student Survey Assessment. Students were asked to complete an on-line opinion survey. The survey was completed by students enrolled in sections under the supervision of the Basic Course Director (the survey was available at an on-line site and accessed using a password); it was a voluntary and an anonymous survey. The survey was completed by 371 students or 51% of those enrolled. The survey was constructed on a five-point scale and was divided into four parts: opinions about the course of a general nature, self-assessment of preparation time, opinions about the COMM 210 course objectives, and opinions about the UCC objectives. Briefly, the survey revealed:

- While 76% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their major and career would involve presentations, only 32.7% agreed or strongly agreed that they would enroll in the course if it were not required.
- 78.5% agreed or strongly agreed that audience analysis helped them to think about the interests of others.
- 85.5% agreed or strongly agreed that the process of choosing speech topics helped them to think about their own interests.
- 64.2% felt that the course had helped them to think about difficult questions and answers.
- 89.5% indicated that they learned new information by listening to others give presentations.
- 81.4% felt the course helped them to become more comfortable communicating with their classmates
- An average of 88% (i.e., average of scores on all items pertaining to the course objectives) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the course objectives were met.
- An average of 79.7% (i.e., average of scores on all items pertaining to the UCC objectives) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the UCC objectives were being met.
- Anywhere from 4-20% indicated they were "unsure" (option 3 on the survey) on any given UCC objective question.

Results of Exam Assessment. The same midterm and final exams are administered to each of the sections under the supervision of the Basic Course Director. Each exam is a 50-question, non-comprehensive exam scored by University Computing Services. Based on statistical analysis, exam scores may be adjusted and questions rewritten for future exams. To summarize, the analysis of exam data revealed that students comprehend the subject matter and actually perform better on questions that are linked directly to UCC

objectives than they do on questions strictly related to course content. The data do not show that students are aware of the connection between course content and UCC objectives, however.

Results of Speech Assessment. Outlines, videos, and critiques sheets were collected and compared. Thesis statements and outlines were used to demonstrate student awareness and concern with issues related to the UCC and course objectives. Student critiques were used to demonstrate audience awareness of UCC and course objectives. Videos and instructor critiques were used to demonstrate student performance levels. Assessment demonstrated that students were more aware of problem recognition than problem solving.

Results of Assessment of Written Assignments. Assessment of the Outside Speaker Critique assignment revealed that students who chose to complete the assignment later in the semester performed better than those who chose to complete the assignment early in the semester. Later papers were better written grammatically and were more likely to be actual analysis rather than just description of the event. The assignment does seem to meet our goals of having students participate in non-classroom communication events. Students attended campus lectures, civic meetings, religious services, and watched live or taped-live programs on CSPAN or CNN. Interestingly, of the students who chose to attend a religious service for this assignment, many choose to attend a service of a different religion or denomination than they might otherwise have chosen. Also, those students completing assignments earlier in the semester focused more on the speaker's delivery than on other aspects of the event; those completing the assignments later in the semester seem to take a more balanced view.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Consider how your basic course fits in with the other general education courses. As we noted in our previous assessment reports, my department believes it could enhance the COMM 210 experience if students were to complete their ENG requirements before they take COMM 210. Because there is no such requirement, COMM 210 instructors must address basic skills that students should have mastered from ENG classes.[10] Those students who have had their ENG classes are likely to become disinterested by such efforts. If all students in COMM 210 were to have mastered basic skills of composition and research, COMM 210 could focus more on presentational strategies and skills of delivery. Hence, we could better accomplish our charge as a UCC core class.

Consider the Resources Required versus the Resources Offered. Know how those resources are to be provided and divided. The general education program allows the department of Communication Studies to offer 22 graduate assistantships; however the program must also lend its support to efforts to increase stipends in order for the department to remain competitive. It has not always been willing to do so. And because the general education courses are "cash cows" for the departments in which they are housed, a competition is created between those who have the courses and those who want them. Assessment becomes necessary not only to show what is being accomplished and where problems may lie, but assessment is necessary to keep those

who would offer other competing courses at bay.

Consider if this is what you really want. Results of the assessment of COMM 210 and UCC objectives raised some serious considerations. Is the decrease in anxiety that is demonstrated--although statistically significant--enough? Is this an "acceptable" level by UUC standards, or even the department's standards? Would less focus on general education and more focus on course content change this? Students perform better on exam questions that are linked to UCC objectives than they do to on questions strictly related to course content. Why? Does this demonstrate a determent to the learning of course content?

Being a part of a university's general education core may thrust a department into university limelight in some respects. Scrutiny will be on-going from many levels of the university, but granted some of those levels are more important than others. Other departments may come to know you only from the general education course and may overlook the department's other areas and strengths. Students may limit their view of communication to only the content covered in the course. But this, however, may be weighed against the numbers of students who can be at least minimally exposed to the discipline through a general education course.

Can a basic course in communication be a part of a university's general education program? Of course it can. Can it be a valuable asset to general education and remain true to the discipline? Yes. But given the resources of the department, the needs of the students, the talents and goals of the faculty, and the dictates of general education and how it is defined at any given university, there will be compromises to make.

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[1] From the *Ball State University Undergraduate Catalog* 2000-2002, pp. 28-31

[2] The six supporting statements were further developed in the original assessment report submitted to the UCC. For a complete rationale, please contact the author and/or refer to the references at the end of this paper.

[3] The department faculty was involved in the assessment process in a number of ways. They were involved in the ranking of the UCC goals, the selection of assessment methods and materials, and in the provision of syllabi. The department Curriculum and Planning Development Committee met regularly with the Director of the Basic Course to discuss the UCC and course objectives and the training of the GTA's. Discussion of UCC and the UCC goals were discussed with the GTA's during frequent staff meetings and they were periodically surveyed for their impression on ways to improve the course and the assessment procedures.

[4] Typically, over 80% of the students enrolled are traditional freshmen and sophomores.

[5] If relevant to your cause, note which general education objectives are affective and which are behavioral. Assessment measures many be different and more difficult for the

affective objectives.

[6] The course objectives as listed on the course syllabus are a) demonstrate competence in basic communication principles, b) select and limit speech topics that are significant and appropriate for the audience, c) analyze of the classroom audience and any other audience to which one might speak, d) construct and arrange ideas in an organized fashion: including the use of appropriate patterns of arrangement, compelling introductions and conclusions, and effective transitional statements, e) identify, select, and use effective supporting materials, f) use visual aids effectively, g) deliver informative and persuasive presentations in an effective and extemporaneous manner with basic competency in the use of your voice and body, h) choose accurate, vivid and appropriate words in constructing your speeches, I) improve your confidence in any public speaking situation, j) display improved abilities in critical listening, k) accomplish all of the above in an ethical manner.

[7] These activities include lectures, dyadic and small group discussions, classroom exercises, and student presentations. Specific topics addressed include '"Nature of Communication" (i.e., model, axioms); '"Listening," "Audience Analysis," "Topic Selection," "Purposes and Theses," "Research," "Evidence," "Organization," "Outlining," "Delivery and Nonverbal Communication," "Style," "Giving Information," '"Persuasion," and "Special Occasion Speeches." For more information on course content, please feel free to visit the course web site at www.comm210.com.

[8] As the nine member UCC committee changes by at least 1/3 every year and as assessment of UCC courses occurs in three to five year cycles, it is critical to periodically consult with the committee to determine their interests and concerns.

[9] The number of sections in any given semester ranges from 45-60. Two to four of those sections are faculty taught the rest are under the direction of the Basic Course Director and Graduate Teaching Assistants.

[10] For example, research skills in general and specific skills for our university library in particular.

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